Crossing the border

Historical and linguistic divides among the Bunaq in central Timor

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Abstract
The Bunaq are a Papuan language-speaking people straddling the border of Indonesian West Timor and independent East Timor. This paper looks at the history of the Bunaq as a “border” people in Timor. “Border” is interpreted here in two ways, as referring to: (i) a political division, the boundary line separating one country from another, and (ii) a linguistic division, the distinguishing line between Papuan and Austronesian languages. I examine the effect that the Bunaq position at the political and linguistic borders of Timor has had on the people and their language.

Keywords
Bunaq, Timor, border disputes, linguistic borrowing and change.

1 Introduction
The island of Timor is located at the eastern end of the Minor Sundic Island chain in east Nusantara. It is unique in the region for the fact that it has been a divided island and a source of dispute for centuries. Today Timor is split roughly in the middle between independent East Timor and Indonesian West Timor. The modern division of the island has its roots in colonial borders drawn following more than a century of intermittent dispute and negotiation between the Portuguese and Dutch.

Timor is not only unusual in the region for its political division, but also for its linguistic division. As in much of the Philippines, western Indonesia and the Pacific, east Nusantara is dominated by languages of the Austronesian family (Adelaar 2005). By contrast, Timor is home to Papuan (or non-Austronesian...